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UNCLAS VATICAN 000194

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/WE (LEVIN), NEA/NGA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL PHUM PINR IZ PHUM PINR IZ VT VTPREL](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ: RELEASED ARCHBISHOP CALLS FOR U.S. WITHDRAWAL

SUMMARY

1.(SBU) Hours after being released by insurgents, Mosul's Syro-Catholic Archbishop called for a timetable for U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq. Archbishop Basile Georges Casmoussa emphasized his good relations with local Muslims and blamed his kidnapping on mistaken identity. He further claimed that his kidnappers' goal had been "to get Americans out of the country." The prelate attributed his quick release to the Pope's strong plea on his behalf. For its part, the Holy See said it had paid no ransom for Casmoussa's release and had been surprised by the kidnapping given that both Christians and Muslims held the archbishop in high regard. An official of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic church in Rome countered Casmoussa's comments on the U.S. presence in Iraq, saying that despite rising violence, the U.S. had to stay "to get the job done."

CALL FOR WITHDRAWAL TIMETABLE

2.(U) Just hours after his release, Mosul's Catholic Archbishop called for the U.S. to set a timetable for troop withdrawal. In an interview with the Rome-based Catholic news agency, Asia News, Archbishop Basile Georges Casmoussa said his abduction was not "anti-Christian," but rather "something done to get the Americans out of the country." The archbishop asserted that "there was no common ground between Iraqi Christians and the occupiers." He claimed his abductors had at first not realized who he was, and had freed him after hearing the Vatican's call for his release. Casmoussa said he enjoyed good relations with the Muslim community and that he had received many messages of support from his Muslim friends when he returned home.

VATICAN PRESSURE

3.(SBU) The Vatican was particularly energetic in working for Casmoussa's release, issuing an official papal statement to the press as soon as news of his abduction came in. Charge spoke to Deputy Prime Minister Archbishop Leonardo Sandri in the hours after the abduction was reported, who expressed appreciation for U.S. interest and welcomed further information from U.S. sources and U.S. action to secure the archbishop's release. In a subsequent meeting, the Holy See's Assessor, Monsignor Gabriele Caccia, told Charge that the Vatican had learned that Casmoussa had been abducted by mistake by a group that was seeking money, not for any religious motivation. After the quick release, the Vatican insisted that no ransom had been paid. Its official statement said the Holy See had been totally surprised by the abduction, given the great esteem both the Christian and Muslim communities held for Casmoussa.

CHALDEAN REP: NOT AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN CAMPAIGN

4. (SBU) The Chaldean Catholic Church's representative in Rome, Monsignor Philip Najim, told us January 19 that he had been in contact with Chaldean Patriarch Emmanuel Delly, who had not expressed increased concern for his own safety. "Let's hope [the abduction of a high-ranking Christian official] was just a mistake, as they say it was," Najim said. He asserted that there had been continuing violence against Christians in recent weeks, but felt that, while the incidents underscored a perilous security situation in Iraq, they did not represent an increased targeting of Christians by insurgents.

U.S. MUST FINISH THE JOB

15. (SBU) When asked about Casmoussa's statements regarding the American presence in Iraq, Najim merely emphasized his opinion that the U.S. had to stay to "get the job done." "The situation is getting worse and worse," he said, "but only America can fix it." He suggested that the USG needed to devote greater resources to its Iraq efforts if it were to be successful. "I don't care about Saddam, [the claims of the existence of] WMDs, or anything in the past," he continued. "Let's be practical and move ahead. If you are

successful America will be beloved and the whole region could change for the better."

COMMENT

6.(SBU) Casmoussa's comments on the U.S. presence in Iraq track with previous remarks he has made. Just last month he told an American Catholic weekly that there was no shortage of pain, hardship and even death caused by the U.S. military presence in Iraq. He claimed Americans killed a young member of his flock in 2003 and that one of his monks had been left paralyzed after a road accident involving an American tank in early 2004. His political sensibilities aside, the quick and forceful reaction by the Vatican to Casmoussa's kidnapping illustrates the Holy See's continuing preoccupation for the safety of the Christian community in Iraq.

17. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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